

THE ILLIMITABLE LOVE OF GOD

WHAT is the biggest thing on which the human mind can be exercised?

In what can we most easily lose ourselves in the overwhelming sense of the immeasurable? There are the vast lone spaces of the stellar fields, peopled with countless worlds, crossed by mysterious highways, with stars as the pilgrims, ever moving on their unknown journeyings. We can lose ourselves there. There is "the dark backward and abysm of time," opening door after door in ever-receding epochs, back through twilight and dawn into the primeval darkness, where the inquisitive mind falters and faints. And we can lose ourselves there. There is the appalling wilderness of human need, beginning from my own life, with its taint of blood, its defect of faculty, its dreary gap in circumstance and condition, and repeated in every other life in every street, in every city and village and country throughout the inhabited world. And we can lose ourselves there. And then there is the deadly, ubiquitous pres-

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ence of human sin, in all its chameleon forms—well-dressed, ill-dressed, blazing in passion, mincing in vanity, and freezing in moral indifference and unbelief. All these are stupendous themes, and the mind that ventures upon them is like the dove that ventured upon the waste of waters, and, soon growing weary of wing, returned to the place of its rest. But there is something more majestic than the heavens, more wonderful than the far, mysterious vistas of time, more pervasive than human need, and more abounding than human sin. The biggest thing with which the mind can cope is the infinite love of God; and all our sanctified powers, and all the ministries of holy fellowship, and all the explorations of eternity will never reach a limit in its unsearchable wealth. The biggest thing you and I will ever know is the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. There will always be “a region beyond,” and for the already wondering eyes there will always be a new surprise: “The height, and depth, and length, and breadth, and to know the love of God, which passeth knowledge.”

1. Let us reverently gaze into the *height* of the love of God. In love the scale of height is measured by the degree of purity. The height in the scale of diamonds is determined

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by an analogous standard. A diamond is of the "first water" when it is without flaw or tint of any kind. And love is lofty in proportion to its brilliance. Love can be deteriorated and degraded by the tint of jealousy. It can be debased by the tint of envy. It can be vulgarized by a strain of carnal passion. These earthly elements may be mixed with the heavenly substance, and its spiritual value is reduced. So that the first test to apply to any love is the test of purity, which is the test of height, the test as to how far it is sublimated, and separated from selfish and fleshly ingredients which dim and spoil its lustre.

Now it is here that the Scriptures begin in their revelation of the love of God. They begin with its brilliance, its holiness. "In Him is no darkness at all!" How would that be as a description of a diamond? "No darkness at all!" Nothing sinful in His love! But more than that. Nothing shady in it, nothing questionable: nothing compromising or morally indifferent! No darkness at all; no blackness of faithlessness; no twilight of forgetfulness; "no night there!"

And thus it is that, when the Book guides us in the contemplation of the eternal love, it first of all leads us into the contemplation of the eternal light. Always and everywhere

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this is where we begin. If I listen to a psalmist, he leads me into the holy place: "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy." If I listen to a prophet, I am led into the same sacred precincts: "The high and lofty One whose name is holy." If I listen to the mystic seraphim of the Old Testament, I hear them cry one to another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts." If I listen to the songs of the Apocalypse, I find them burdened with the same theme: "They rest not day and night saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty." If I reverently listen to the Master in His secret communion with the Unseen, I hear Him say, "Holy Father." And if I listen to the prayer which He Himself teaches me to pray, I am led immediately to the holy glory of the Lord: "Our Father . . . hallowed be Thy name." Always and everywhere this is the beginning of our contemplation. We are led away into the light, into the unshadowed brilliance, into the holiness of God. If, therefore, God's love be symbolized by a mountain, its heights will be clothed in the dazzling whiteness of the everlasting snow. Love's heights are found in love's holiness. "God is light," "God is truth," "God is love."

From this primary teaching I wish to ad-

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duce two inferences. And the first is this. The force of love always depends upon its height. We find the analogy in water. The force of falling water is determined by its height. In an English home, if your shower-bath is lazy and loitering, chilling you rather than bracing you, your remedy is to raise your cistern, and in the increased height you will get the requisite tingle. The tonic is born in loftiness. It is even so with love. There is a type of love which has no vigour because it has no height. It is a weak, sickly sentiment which just crawls about you. It is low, and therefore it has no enlivening force. It is mixed with earthly elements, and therefore it has no heavenly quickening. It enervates, it does not invigorate. The more holy love is, the higher it is, and the more fraught it is with vitality. How, then, must it be with the love of God? Born in holiness, it has power enough to waken the dead. Have you seen an Alpine river, born amid the snows, and rolling gloriously through the vale? That is the figure we need: "And I saw a river of water of life, clear as crystal," proceeding from "the great white throne," out of the unshadowed depths of eternal holiness. "There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God," and the holy power of that river is

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determined by the holy heights in which it is born.

And the second inference is this, that the ultimate ministry and goal of love is also determined by the height of its holiness. Once again seek your analogy in water. Water rises no higher than its source. Water can lift no higher than its source. It is even so with love. Our love can never raise a loved one higher than the love itself. There are aspects of that law which are altogether staggering. Take the love of a parent for his child. Our own tainted love will not lift our child into purity. Our own jealous love will not lift our child into an unembittered disposition. Our own envious love will not lift our child into moral serenity. Our love will not lift above its own level. That is the solemn responsibility of a lover, that if the love be low it will scarcely lift the beloved one above the plains. If we want to lift higher we must heighten our love. How, then, is it with the love of God? His love, so glorious in holiness, can raise to its own level, and lift us into "heavenly places in Christ Jesus." "They shall sit with Me on My throne." "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*"

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God's love imparts its own loveliness, until one day we too shall be "altogether lovely."

From the supreme height of the fells, on the island of Arran, there comes rolling down the granite slopes a gloriously alive and vitalizing stream. They call it "The White Water," and it is well named. It gleams on the slopes like the whitest foam. Out at sea, when everything else was obscure, I could see the white water running on its ceaseless errand. And oh! the loveliness of its bequests, and the unutterable beauty of its dells and glens! It feeds the bracken, it nourishes the stalwart heather, it moistens the retiring fern. The White Water endows its haunts with its own loveliness. And the white water of the eternal love, ceaselessly flowing from the holy heart of God, brings with it power to make everything lovely, and at last to present everything spotless before the throne.

2. Let us gaze into its *depths*. Let me link together detached sentences from the Word, that in their associations we may discern what is meant by the depth of the love of God. "The high and lofty one whose name is holy." . . . "He is gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner!" "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands,

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and that He was come from God, and went to God . . . began to wash the disciples' feet." "And one cried with another, saying, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord!" . . . "Neither do I condemn thee; go, and sin no more!" All these are suggestive of what is meant by the love-depths of our God. And on these I want to build this teaching, that it is only the really lofty that can truly reach the really deep. The arm that can reach far upward is the only arm that can reach far downward. It is only holy love that can deal with humanity's deepest needs. A low love has no depths of service. Low love is a thing of compromise, and has no dealings with extremes, whether of holiness or of sin. Pharisaic love had no height. "I thank Thee I am not as other men are." That is not loftiness: it is superciliousness; it is not the vision from the snow-white hills. And because Pharisaic love had no height, it had no corresponding depth; and when the Pharisee saw One descending into the deep pits of human need, he cried in self-respecting amazement, "He eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners!" Holy love, crystalline love, goes down and down into human necessity, and is not afraid of the taint. Sunbeams can move among sewage and catch no defilement. The

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brilliant, holy love of God ministers in the deepest depths of human need.

God's love is deeper than human sorrow, and how deep that is my appointed lot gives me daily and deepening experience. But drop your plummet-line into the deepest sea of sorrow, and at the end of all your soundings "underneath are the everlasting arms." God's love is deeper than death, and there are multitudes who know how deep grim death can be. "Just twelve months ago," said a near friend of mine a week or two ago, "I dug a deep grave!" Aye, and I know it was deep enough. But the grave-digger's spade cannot get beneath our Father's love. God's love is deeper than the deepest grave you ever dug! "And entering into the sepulchre they saw an angel," and you can never dig into any dreary, dreary dwelling of death which is beyond the reach of those white-robed messengers of eternal love. Yes, God's love is deeper than death. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

And God's love is *deeper* than sin. One night, when I was recently crossing the Atlantic, an officer of our boat told me that we had just passed over the spot where the *Titanic* went down. And I thought of all that life and wreckage beyond the power of man to recover

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and redeem. And I thought of the great bed of the deep sea, with all its held treasure, too far down for man to reach and restore. "Too far down!" And then I thought of all the human wreckage engulfed and sunk in oceanic depths of nameless sin. Too far gone! For what? Too far down! For what? Not too far down for the love of God! Listen to this: "He descended into hell," and He will descend again if you are there. "If I make my bed in hell, Thou art there." "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." "He *bore* our sin"; then He got beneath it; down to it and beneath it; and there is no human wreckage, lying in the ooze of the deepest sea of iniquity, that His deep love cannot reach and redeem. What a Gospel! However far down, God's love can get beneath it!

Stronger His love than death or hell,
Its riches are unsearchable:
The first-born sons of light
Desire in vain its depths to see,
They cannot tell the mystery,
The length, and breadth, and height!

3. Let us gaze into its *breadth*. Here again I want to say that the breadth of love is determined by its height. Low love is always very confined and exclusive. Lofty love is

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liberal and expansive. Low love is like a lake; lofty love is like a river. We can imprison a lake within our own estate; we cannot imprison a river. It will be out, and about, and on! And sometimes we foolishly try to imprison the love of God. "We make His love too narrow by false limits of our own." Men have tried to appoint social limits, and national limits, and ecclesiastical limits, and credal limits. We may as well try to break up the sea into allotments as to "peg out" the love of God. The love of God is as broad as the race, and nowhere is there a single man in any clime, or of any colour, in congested city, in tropical jungle, or on a lonely frontier-line where a pioneer has built himself a primitive home—nowhere is there a single man, woman, or child who is orphaned of a place in the eternal Father's heart. "If He lose *one* He goeth out!" . . . O love of God, how broad!

4. And what of its *length*? There is no end to it. To what length will it not go? "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." To that length! "Becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross!" To that length! "Goeth after that which is lost until He find it." To that length! God's love is

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as long as the longest road. God's love is
as long as the longest day. God's love is as
long as the longest night. God's love is as
long as life. God's love is as long as eternity.
"I have loved thee with an everlasting love."
"I will never leave thee *nor* forsake thee."
"Love never faileth."